

The History of Sexualities, an Argument

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This argumentative essay, while not precisely feminist in nature, was written for my History of Sex and Sexualities course at Michigan State University, which was required for my minor in Women, Gender, and Social Justice. As such, it is relevant because it deals with gender and sexuality, which are both branches of study within feminist and gender studies. In this essay, I argue that the modern concept of homosexuality, which was not invented until the late 19th century, is an inadequate means by which to categorize same sex love and relationships for the majority of human history. I reference and agree with David Halpern, and cite his essay, "Sex Before Sexuality," to back my argument that the word "homosexuality," with its specifically modern connotations, should not be used to describe same sex relations prior to the late 19th century.

In a similar way to David Halperin's argument that homosexuality did not exist before 1892, it can be argued that sexuality—in terms of how we define it in a modern sense as heterosexual v. homosexual—did not exist before 1900. The modern concept of sexuality is a scientific construction, which has provided us with categories for people with different sexual preferences. If it can be argued that homosexuality did not exist in the collective consciousness of earlier cultures, and that the concept of homosexuality is a modern one, then by extension, heterosexuality did not exist either, as Halperin points out in his essay "Sex Before Sexuality." The logical conclusion to all of this, therefore, is that sexuality as a definable and concrete binary did not exist for the majority of history. People were sexual, yes, but they did not have prescribed sexualities that were seen as fundamental parts of their identity as we do today. There was only one sexuality: procreative sexuality. Although some societies have been tolerant of same sex sexual acts, like the ancient Greeks for example, most saw anyone who engaged in non-procreative sex as a sexual invert or deviant—but not a homosexual. In these kinds of societies, any deviation from a sexuality that produced children was seen as sexual inversion, a category into which all forms of gender deviation and non-procreative sex acts were thrown, not just sex between members of the same sex. Since sexual orientation did not exist, a person's individual actions were evaluated by society as being sinful or not, moral or immoral, normal or pathological—but the individual under scrutiny, regardless of their actions and preferences, was not viewed as fundamentally different from others, sexually speaking, and therefore, worthy of their own sexual category (Halperin, 41-2). In many times and cultures they were believed to have done something wrong, of course, but their acts were acts—maybe sinful, maybe abnormal—but still individual acts. The current debate over homosexuality in history

and whether or not we can apply the term “homosexual” to people of earlier cultures has to do primarily with the use of actor’s categories v. analytic categories. By using the term “homosexual,” which comes with a wealth of culture-specific connotations, to refer to people who did not have the same ideas regarding sexuality, we are failing to see and understand their cultures from *their* perspectives.

In order to understand why we cannot refer to people from previous historical periods as homosexuals, we need first to understand the term homosexual in its modern context. The 19th century marked a huge transition in social perceptions of sex because science created a discourse on sex. It was this discourse, fueled by the Western obsession with confessing, that allowed us to create a “whole machinery for speechifying, analyzing, and investigating” sex, and later, sexuality (Foucault, 32). This “machinery” did not exist during previous periods in history. We came up with categories like homosexual and heterosexual as a result of this discourse. Sexuality came into being at this point because there was more than one category available, and procreative sex was no longer all-encompassing. As Gayle Rubin argues in “Thinking Sex,” changing ideas about sexuality were also a result of industrialization and urbanization. These phenomena affected every facet of modern life, and:

. . . generated new forms of state apparatus, reorganized family relations, altered gender roles, made possible new forms of identity, produced new varieties of social inequality, and created new formats for political and ideological conflict. It also gave rise to a new sexual system characterized by distinct types of sexual persons, populations, stratification, and political conflict (Rubin, 16).

The process of industrialization also led to sexual migration. Homosexuals moved to urban areas where they were able to form communities, which allowed homosexuality to acquire “much of the institutional structure of an ethnic group” in a way that it never could have

prior to the Industrial Revolution (Rubin, 17). In the same way that Little Italies and Chinatowns were formed in major U.S. cities to represent different ethnic groups, so were gay communities, especially in New York City and San Francisco (Miller, lecture 3/24/09). This led to a sense of community among homosexuals, and allowed many people to create new lifestyles for themselves. With modern ideas of homosexuality as a category came stereotypes used to recognize members of that category. In a modern sense, there are many assumptions about what homosexuality is and is not, but the fact that it is considered a distinct category from heterosexuality is certain. Apart from the deviant sexual *acts* committed by people in previous societies, there was no framework that people could use to assume someone was homosexual or anything even approximating the word. An example of this as a modern phenomenon can be found in Sarah Igo's essay, "The Private Lives of the Public," which analyzes the changes in society during the 1940s when Alfred Kinsey's studies on sexuality were published. Many people were disgusted with the statistics, believing the subjects Kinsey studied could not have been representative of the normal, moral portion of the American population. One man was astounded by Kinsey's statistics regarding the number of people who had participated in homosexual acts. He said, "In all my life; and I have been around some, I never, to my knowledge, met a homosexual" (Igo, 255). People believe (often incorrectly) that they can recognize homosexuality now in ways that people would never have presumed to be able to recognize people who were committing deviant, non-procreative sexual acts in the past. This is because homosexuality is tied up with identity in ways that individual acts of the past never could be. For better or for worse, we tend to associate homosexuality with a variety of physical characteristics, with

a certain sense of identity, and with a specific lifestyle that cannot be applied to individuals of previous societies. Too much baggage comes with homosexuality as a modern concept for historians to use it effectively within a historical context.

The Greek practice of pederasty is often cited in this debate because ancient Greek society condoned sexual acts that would be considered homosexual today within our modern framework. Interestingly, both David Halperin and John Boswell, a historian who argues that the term homosexuality *can* be used to refer to sex and love between males in earlier cultures, use Greek pederasty in their respective arguments. Although the Greeks accepted, and in fact, encouraged sex between males, their ideas about these relationships were built within an entirely different context from our own—with different rules, for different purposes. There were rules in Greek society that determined how Greek males were supposed to conduct their relationships with one another. Free, older men were supposed to have sex with young boys—but the older man, the erastes, was expected to take on the active role of penetrating and the younger man, the eromenos, was expected to take on the passive role of being penetrated. These relationships were built around a social hierarchy that put the older men in the sexually active role that was proportional to their social status and young boys in the sexually passive role that was proportional to theirs (Smith, lecture 1/20/09). Sex, in this context, was seen as something you did, but not necessarily with somebody. You either experienced sex as an act, as the penetrator, or an “impact,” as the penetrated (Halperin, 49). Also significant in Greek society was the concept of beauty and its relationship to sexual desire. The Greeks did not recognize different kinds of desire. As a Greek male, you would desire first and foremost to have sex with something beautiful—regardless of whether that something was a man or a woman. They

equated sexual desire with appetite, believing that it was appropriate to desire good food when hungry in the same way that it was appropriate to want to have sex with something beautiful (Smith, lecture 1/20/09). In Greek society, unlike our own where we see sexual acts in terms of male and female, sexual relationships were built on power relations and sexual partners were seen as active or passive, rather than male or female. According to Halperin, “There were not, so far as they knew, two different kinds of ‘sexuality,’ two differently structured psychosexual states or modes of affective orientation, but a single form of sexual experience, which all free males shared—making due allowance for variations in individual tastes, as one might make for individual palates” (Halpern, 50-1).

The 19th century marked a huge transition in the way people thought about sex, gender, and eventually, sexuality. Psychologists, physicians, sexologists, biologists, and other medical practitioners redefined sex—it could suddenly be observed, diagnosed, and finally, cured. It became increasingly common to think of sex as serving the biological function of reproduction and anything that interrupted that biological function became considered abnormal (Smith, lecture 2/19/09). After the invention of biology, males and females were seen as being increasingly different from one another anatomically, and female body parts that had previously shared anatomical names with male body parts became linguistically differentiated. As Thomas Laqueur argues in his book, *Making Sex*, by the 19th century the one-sex model that had been used to understand what we would now call biological sex from the classical period to the Renaissance had been gradually replaced with a two-sex model. If only one sex was acknowledged for the majority of history as Laqueur effectively argues, then our modern perceptions about same sex v. opposite sex sexual preference are not only irrelevant to past

societies and peoples, but harmful when applied where they do not belong. Sex between members of what we would now call the same sex was viewed as natural in certain classical societies, but their idea of biological sex itself was very different from our own. According to Laqueur, in the context of ancient Greece, “Two sexes refers not to the clear and distinct kinds of being we might mean when we speak of opposite sexes, but rather to *delicate, difficult-to-read shadings of one sex*. There is, for example, no inherent gendering of desire and hence of coupling” (Laqueur, 52). Therefore, people were always having sex with someone of their own sex, because there was only one sex within the one-sex model. The significance of all this is that if we applied our *modern* concept, homosexuality, to history *before* the two-sex model took root in Western society, *all* sexual acts between people would have been homosexual by our own standards within the actor’s societies. This is obviously problematic, and it reiterates the point that Halperin makes, which is that homosexuality cannot be applied to people from earlier cultures as a category of sexuality, and neither can heterosexuality, by extension. If this is the case, the concept of sexuality as a means of categorization did not exist until the two-sex model took root and science created a discourse on sex that resulted in the invention of homosexuality as a form of sexuality, and later heterosexuality as its opposite.

In conclusion, sexuality is a relatively recent “human product” in the same way that “diets, methods of transportation, systems of etiquette . . . and modes of oppression” are (Rubin, 10). Homosexuality has become a distinct, defined category that has evolved and taken on culture-specific connotations. It is a product of modern culture and it cannot be applied to previous periods and peoples in history. Since homosexuality and heterosexuality did not exist as definable, concrete binaries before the year 1900, there was

no concept of sexuality as a part of someone's identity in the way race and gender have historically been, because there was only one sexuality and it was taken for granted: procreative sexuality. People committed deviant sexual acts but that didn't make them worthy of a new sexual category until scientific discourse led to the creation of homosexuality, and later, heterosexuality. No one can put the social transition from deviant acts to homosexuality into words better than Michel Foucault when he argues that homosexuality became seen:

. . . less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature . . . Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault, 43).

Homosexuality is now a category and with it has come sexuality as a means by which we can define ourselves. In arguing what I have argued, I have not meant to say that there was not love and sexual passion between members of the same sex throughout history, only that our own culture-specific ideas about homosexuality cannot act as a suitable framework for better understanding their experiences.

References

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